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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001487

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: OSCE CENTER CHIEF DESCRIBES
CHALLENGES; SOME PROGRESS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Sylvia Reed Curran, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. The head of the Ashgabat OSCE Center briefed DAS George Krol about OSCE programs and prospects in Turkmenistan. The number of projects is expanding, including several new fields, but it seems the Turkmen are merely checking a box by holding the events, with no tangible results. The recent government restrictions on study abroad for some students was an indication of how far the Turkmen are from complying with their OSCE commitments. Within the government, the bureaucracy remains an obstacle to reform.
END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On November 18, Head of Ashgabat OSCE Center Arsim Zekolli briefed SCA Deputy Assistant Secretary George Krol about the activities of the Center and his view of the path ahead for its work in Turkmenistan. He began by describing several important positives and negatives about the OSCE's work in Turkmenistan. On the positive side, the OSCE has increased the number of projects in the political, human, and economic dimensions, including "ground-breaking" projects on trafficking in persons, media, and border security training. The Turkmen government has shown interest in working in the political and economic dimensions, less so in the human dimension. Negative developments have been the government's refusal to allow some students to study abroad, including those headed to the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, and the continued rigidity of channels of communication in working with the government.

13. (C) Regarding the Turkmen government's restrictions on some students' study abroad, Zekolli said it came as a surprise and the real motives are still unknown. He speculated that it was a Turkmen government reaction to the unrest in Iran following its presidential election and that it clearly "came from the top." He also commented about the growing tendency during the past six months for human rights advocacy involving Turkmenistan to be directed at Russia. He viewed the recent trial of environmentalist Andrey Zatoka as the culmination of this trend, noting that the Zatoka case generated criticism of the Center from outside Turkmenistan -- that it was not able to do anything positive to resolve the case. Zekolli warned against the danger of going from

the extreme of always being critical of the Turkmen government to the other extreme of viewing its record and actions too favorably. He said even the Turkmen government expects criticism from the OSCE, but the organization is not an independent NGO like Human Rights Watch or Reporters without Borders.

¶4. (C) Zekolli said he was satisfied with the government-run Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, and its director Shirin Akhmedova. But while he respects her and is happy with how she works, he noted that he would not pay her a public compliment, only criticize, in order to avoid jeopardizing her position within the government. In general, Zekolli said the government needed to be able to accept criticism not as "mud in the face," but as "red lines not to be crossed." While diplomats in Turkmenistan will generally say the government cadres are well-trained, the problem lies in a lack of political will. Instead, the "mantra" prevails that everything is ideal and perfect. At the same time, older cadres trained during the Soviet era work to block change. Zekolli suggested that, if one ministry could open up and reform, perhaps others would follow suit. He mentioned that the Ministry of Education is impenetrable, in no small part because of its strategic significance in the sense that every community throughout the country has a school. Young people are directed to pursue technical studies such as oil and gas, but not encouraged to become lawyers, journalists and the like. (NOTE: While the Turkmen leadership has no interest in young people studying liberal arts, they have mentioned several times that they supported more students entering law. END NOTE.)

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¶5. (C) Despite all the projects completed, Zekolli noted that the Turkmen seem to be "checking a box" with their participation. He saw no results that affected the person on the street. When the OSCE organized trainings for customs officials, law faculty, and media representatives, for example, suggestions for practical exercises to complement the theoretical lectures were ignored. Among the lessons learned in implementing projects, Zekolli suggested that one training trip abroad does more good than three months of training in Turkmenistan. In proposing training projects for consideration, the initial Turkmen reaction is consistently distrust and suspicion until the OSCE is able to show how the training will be carried out on the ground, at which point the Turkmen become supportive.

¶6. (C) Since the Turkmen government refuses to provide information about conditions in the country, the void is filled by rumor and exaggeration within the international community, which can be more negative than the reality. Zekolli felt that, while Berdimuhamedov may want to see reforms, the impetus for change stops in the bureaucracy. Zekolli asked rhetorically why Berdimuhamedov takes on the sins of Niyazov by continuing to detain those who were political prisoners under the former president. Zekolli opined that Berdimuhamedov could release them and lessen the criticism by the international community. Zekolli recounted a meeting with Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov where Zekolli said that the relations between the OSCE Center and the government were moving in a favorable direction and that the OSCE wanted to cooperate with the government. A small gesture by the government every month would help, for example to start a student newspaper for youth issues. But currently, according to Zekolli, no one knows how to address the division of responsibility between the president and the government and who should take action. Even "liberal" Turkmen politicians think unanimously that the prisoners should remain in prison.

¶7. (C) Zekolli observed that, during the opening ceremony of an international conference on energy security in Ashgabat in the spring, Berdimuhamedov was visibly angered when foreign attendees turned their backs on him to look at the crowd of students in the balcony cheering loudly for the president.

In Zekolli's view, the incident must have reminded the president that while he may be able to command adulation and respect at home, foreigners do not view him in the same way. Zekolli's colleagues at neighboring OSCE centers have remarked that the Turkmen are ridiculed and viewed as insignificant and "weird" in their respective countries. He suggested Turkmenistan's massive building projects are a Turkmen play for respect.

18. (C) COMMENT: Alternating between positives and negatives, Zekolli was essentially being realistic about the challenges faced by the OSCE Center in performing its mission of advancing Turkmenistan's compliance with OSCE commitments. He also drew frequent parallels with his experience of governments in the Balkans, but generally with the way things were fifteen years ago. It remains to be seen if and when the Turkmen will get beyond simply participating in OSCE seminars and similar events, and muster the political will to apply what is taught and make a noticeable difference in the lives of average people. In the street outside his office Zekoli confided to Krol that he has heard many rumors that Foreign Minister Meredov may be ousted. If that happened, he feared many associated with Meredov such as Democracy and Human rights Center Director Akhmedova would also be relieved of their duties. END COMMENT.

19. (U) DAS Krol cleared this cable.
CURRAN